

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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R 041000Z AUG 78
FM AMCONSUL PALERMO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2564
INFO AMEMBASSY ROME
AMCONSUL FLORENCE
AMCONSUL GENOA
AMCONSUL MILAN
AMCONSUL NAPLES
AMCONSUL TRIESTE
AMCONSUL TURIN

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TAGS: BEXP IT
SUBJECT: SICILY-SPAN FEVER

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SUMMARY: A BRIDGE LINKING SICILY TO MAINLAND ITALY
ACROSS THE STRAITS OF MESSINA HAS PERIODICALLY
PROMPTED INTEREST FOR AT LEAST THE LAST CENTURY.
REFERENCE BY PRIME MINISTER ANDREOTTI IN EARLY JULY
HAS AGAIN STIMULATED LOCAL DISCUSSION. WHILE SICILY'S
GOVERNMENT, BUSINESS AND TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP
GENERALLY SUPPORT BRIDGE PROJECT, SOME FEAR IT WOULD
ABSORB STATE-INTERVENTION AND INVESTMENT CAPITAL AT
AT EXPENSES OF OTHER NEEDED UNDERTAKINGS IN MEZZOGIORNO.
END OF SUMMARY.

1. IN AUGUST 1977 (REFTEL), THE "MESSINA BRIDGE
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GROUP", WHICH INCLUDES FIAT, MONTEDISON, FALK STEEL,
SINSIDER, ITALCEMENTI AND PIRELLI, MADE PUBLIC THE
RESULTS OF THE GROUP'S FEASIBILITY STUDY ON A MESSINA
STRAITS BRIDGE PROJECT. THE STUDY SUGGESTED THE
ENGINEERING FEASIBILITY OF A SINGLE-SPAN SUSPENSION
BRIDGE, WHICH, AT 2.1 MILES STRETCHED BETWEEN TWO
985 FOOT ROWERS ON EITHER SIDE OF THE STRAITS, WOULD

BE THE WORLD'S LONGEST, WITH AN ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME OF 7-1/2 YEARS, EMPLOYMENT OF 600,000 TONS OF STEEL AND 5,000 MEN, AND CONSTANTLY ESCALATING COST ESTIMATES WHICH NOW BEGIN AT DOLS. TWO BILLION, THE STRAITS BRIDGE WOULD BE AN IMPRESSIVE UNDERTAKING BY ANY AND EVERY STANDARD.

2. SICILIAN INTEREST IN THE BRIDGE IS RARELY BELOW THE SURFACE AND IT IS A PERENNIAL PROMISSORY NOTE TROTTED OUT DURING ELECTION TIME. THE CURRENT SPATE OF SPAN-FEVER IS THE PRODUCT OF PRIME MINISTER ANDREOTTI'S REFERENCE TO THE PROJECT IN EARLY JULY DISCUSSION ON THE THREE-YEAR PLAN WITH THE MAJOR LABOR CONFEDERATIONS. ALWAYS ALERT TO ANY SUCH REFERENCES, SICILIAN POLITICAL REACTION WAS RAPID AND VARIED. REGIONAL PRESIDENT MATTARELLA (DC) PROMPTLY STATED THAT WHILE THE BRIDGE WAS A NOBLE AND NECESSARY PROJECT ITS CONSTRUCTION MIGHT VERY WELL DEFLECT INVESTMENT FROM NEEDED AREAS IN THE SOUTH. HIS VIEWS HAVE BEEN SHARSHAWED BY OTHER MAJORITY PARTIES AND BY THE REGIONAL CGIL AND UIL FEDERATIONS. REGIONAL CISL SECRETARY D'ANTONI, IN ONE OF THE MORE VISIONARY STATEMENTS ON THE SUBJECT SUGGESTED THAT IF BRIDGE REALLY WERE A POSSIBLE REALITY, SICILIANS SHOULD SNAP AT THE CHANCE.

3. THOUGH LOCAL AGRICULTURAL, TOURIST AND TRUCKING INDUSTRIES HAVE ACCLAIMED THE PROJECT AS NECESSARY

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LINK BRINGING SICILY CLOSER TO ITS MARKETS, SOME CONCERN REMAINS ABOUT LONG-TERM ECONOMIC IMPACT BRIDGE WOULD HAVE ON MESSINA AREA FOR WHICH STRAITS-FERRY TRAFFIC REPRESENTS PRINCIPAL ECONOMIC RESOURCE. OTHER SICILIAN BUSINESSMEN, AND INDEED SOME POLITICIANS HAVE MADE ATAVISTIC ALLUSIONS TO BRIDGE PROJECT AS TYPICAL INTERVENTION OF NORTHERNERS WHO ARE INTERESTED ONLY IN EXPLOITING SOUTH BY UNLOADING SURPLUS STEEL AND OTHER PRODUCTS IN SOUTHERN PUBLIC WORKS PROJECTS. SOUTHERN ENGINEERING FIRMS ALSO FEAR WORK WOULD GO EXCLUSIVELY TO LARGE NORTHERN FIRMS. MAJOR SICILIAN CIVIL ENGINEERING FIRMS (RENDO, COSTANZO, GRACI AND MANIGLIA) HAVE THUS REPORTEDLY FORMED A CONSORTIUM TO GUARANTEE THAT THEY GET AT LEAST A SLICE OF THE ACTION IF INDEED THERE IS ANY.

4. ALL OF THESE VIEWS HAVE BEEN APLY VENTILATED IN PRESS AND IN SICILIAN REGIONAL ASSEMBLY DEBATE. AT CLOSE OF LATTER, ON JULY 27, THE ASSEMBLY GAVE MATTARELLA A MANDATE TO ASCERTAIN WHETHER NATIONAL GOVERNMENT IS REALLY SERIOUS ABOUT BRIDGE, TO LOOK CLOSELY INTO POSSIBLE PROJECT FINANCING AND MANAGEMENT, AND TO SEE WHETHER ROME IS PREPARED TO INCLUDE

THE PROJECT IN A OVERALL PROGRAM OF MEZZOGIORNO
DEVELOPMENT OR WHETHER IT WOULD CONSTITUTE THE SOLE
MAJOR STATE PROJECT IN THASOUTH OVER THE NEXT DECADE.
COLLINS

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